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Introspection in a sequence of Hávamál stanzas (first version)

Introduction

I started to study Hávamál some 20 years ago. Its translation has more to do with an evolution of its understanding than an achieved creation.

My talk tonight will focus on and turn around two lines of famous s. 138, the one where Óðinn tells that he has been during nine whole nights hanging on a tree and the two lines I translated as “given to Óðinn, I to me” : this way of speech is an attempts to render “*sjálfur sjálfum mér*” that describe how he has been “given to oneself” [note that verb *gefa* does not usually means *to sacrifice* but *to give*]. The classical renderings (for instance, Dronke, Larrington, and Orchard) give “myself to myself” while “I to me” allows the understanding that “I” alludes to ‘my mind’ and “me” alludes to what ‘my mind thinks about my mind’, as if, facing your own memories in a virtual mirror, we would watch them. I feel that this behavior became quite current nowadays. Nevertheless, and as underlined by Evans in his commentaries to the poem, “These first four (138 -141) strophes have given rise to an immense amount of discussion and argument among students of Norse paganism”. We will at first justify the above translation by showing that this type of introspective point of view does exist elsewhere in the poem, namely in s. 18, s. 20, s. 28 s 63, s. 95, and as I just said, also in s. 138 where it has been rendered as “myself to myself” by Dronke, Larrington and Orchard (and others, of course). This last formulation attributes the ‘gift to oneself’ to exactly the same ‘oneself’, it does not imply the presence of several representations of Óðinn as it is in my translation: “given I to me.”

This will lead us to the second part where we try to explain what can be an “active introspection” as opposed to the most classical “lazy selfish introspection.”

We will then open a discussion relative to possible relationships and differences between Óðinn’ fusion of his “thinking” with his “active introspection” and the now exceedingly common idea of the interactions between our ‘conscious sides’ and our ‘unconscious’ ones.

At last, we will say a few words of the superficial resemblance and the deep differences between Old Norse and Christian religions. This will explain why the ‘nice’ synchretism’ (misspelling done on purpose) supposed to take place during the conversion period between these two religions (this statement does not include ‘circumpolar’ syncretism).

1. Five obvious allusions to introspection in Hávamál

[General caveat about this section: I never suggest that the translators may have given an erroneous translation. I do not agree with some points of view induced by their translations]

S. 18: (literal translation)

“The one who is mindful,

Who far away travels,

And ‘lifts’ (undertakes) much for traveling,

(not only does he travel but he undertakes much during his travel).

What **state of mind**

leads such one of the men

who is **aware of mindfulness**?”

Here, a **mind** is **aware of mindfulness**: Óðinn speculates on the (state of) minds of the people who are very active in traveling. Introspection is not obvious unless Óðinn consider him as being of these mindful travelers (which is quite probable).

Dronke: “he knows what knowing is.”

Larrington: “he knows what sort of mind each man controls.”

Orchard: “knows what wits every man controls.”

S. 20

 (literally, three first lines) : “the greedy person self-consumes except if he was conscious of (his) spirit”

Bellows: “The greedy man: if his mind be vague, will eat until sick he is”

Dronke: “A greedy fellow, unless he has good sense, eats himself anguish for life” (not vague mind prevents from greediness)

Larrington: “The greedy man, unless he guards against this tendency, will eat himself into lifelong trouble”

Orchard: “A greedy bloke, unless he curbs his bent, will eat himself into lifelong trouble.”

The translators do not take in account to be “aware of mindfulness” which may mean either “to be aware of human mindfulness” or “to be aware of one’s own mindfulness”. Dronke’s version is the nearest to some kind of introspection.

S. 28

 (literally, three first lines)

 “He thinks himself well knowing

 who can ask questions

 and answer, or both together;

Dronke: “He accounts himself wise who can ask questions and answer them also.”

Larrington: “Wise he esteems himself who knows to question and how to answer as well.”

Orchard: “That man seems clever who knows how to ask and answer just the same.”

Orchard avoids again to hint at self-thinking.

S. 63 (literally, three first lines)

“Ask and say he shall who (wants to become) of the wise ones”

Dronke: “He accounts himself wise who can ask questions and answer them also.”

Larrington: “Asking and answering every wise man should do, he who wants to be reputed intelligent.”

Orchard: “Asking and answering, each clever man master, who want to be called wise.”

S. 95 (literally, whole stanza)

Thought alone knows what

is close to the hamlet of the heart,

he is alone to himself in (the quietness of?) his soul;

nothing (so much like) a disease

for each wise one

as being in self-agreement about nothing.

Inspection of the ‘hamlet of the heart’ to check his ‘my’ heart is quiet and in agreement with myself.

Dronke: “Only thought knows what lives near the heart – a man is alone with himself in his feelings. No malady is worse for any thinking man than to have no happiness for himself in anything.

Larrington: “The mind alone knows what lives near the heart, he is alone with his spirit; no sickness is worse for a sensible man then finding no contentment in anything.”

Orchard: “The mind alone knows what lives near the heart, alone it sees into the soul. Worse for the wise than any disease: finding nothing that make one content.

S. 138 (two of its lines)

“And given to Óðinn

self to self-mine”

Dronke, Larrington and Orchard: “myself to myself”

2. What actions are taking place during these introspective sequences?

s. 18 action: travelling

s. 20 action: action: greediness + avoiding ridicule among wise ones

s. 28: action :to ask and answer

s. 63 action: becoming a wise one.

s. 95 action : living in happiness

s. 145 actions: hanging, offering oneself, gathering rues, falling on the ground. (particularly rich in actions)

3. ‘Who’ are self and self-mine?

We see here two ‘individuals’, one is given to the other. One of them seems to be Óðinn, the other one seems to be ‘what Óðinn thinks of himself’: which one is given to the other? They are united together in a really fusional state, and they are not seen as a fusion between the ‘good sides’ and the ‘bad sides’ of an individual.

4. A (short) comparison with Carl Jung’s archetypes

Jung’s (and Freud’s) work have been very successful in promoting the notion of ‘archetypes’ that belong to our ‘unconscious’ sides. In Jung’s “The structure and dynamics of the psyche” the first one of such archetypes is called ‘shadow’ (practically) identified to “the dark side of the human personality,” that is the “dangerous aspects of the unrecognized dark half of the personality.”

In parallel, Jung often handles the concept of ‘individuation’, that is stopping the constant fight between our conscious and our unconscious by merging them, described as a goal (hard) to achieve before our death (in ‘Memories, Dreams, Reflections’ he claims having been himself late at reaching his own individuation).

Comparing Old Norse belief in “me given to myself” and Jung’s individuation will certainly ask for longer thinking that the present presentation. I nevertheless suggest to always stay aware that the Old Norse belief never introduces the idea of a fight between our bad sides and our good sides: it promotes rather an ‘active merging’ of two features: what we are and what we believe to be.